



BEYOND THE VOID: A JOURNEY THROUGH ELEMENTARY PARTICLES

Notes on the 3rd Artocène Festival in Chamonix.

I often find myself thinking that, since the birth of the first civilizations in the Neolithic era, humans have never stopped filling the world with artifacts. Despite a certain fascination with the material, my discovery of degrowth theories has limited my consumer-driven dopamine rushes. Degrowth convinced me that our surroundings, overrun with human traces, urgently need to empty themselves out and make some room for other life forms in order to recover from anthropization. That's why I was filled with enthusiastic curiosity to discover *Horizon of the Void* – the title of the third installment of the Artocène Festival in Chamonix-Mont-Blanc. Its title immediately sets the tone for this year's iteration and calls attention to the tension between ecological concerns and the impact of contemporary art on the climate. Focusing on the question of the void is, in that sense, both salutary and laden with irony, due to the cumulative nature of art and its system of exchange.

How do artists, whose main activity is to transform ideas into material forms, approach the concept of the void when it seems to contradict the completion of their practices?

While the usage of void inevitably leads visitors to question the material future of art, the curators of Artocène, Laetitia de Chocqueuse and Laurène Maréchal, have chosen to contemplate its theme with an approach rooted in physics, through the prism of spatial perception and the vertiginous verticality evoked by the surrounding Alpine peaks.

Chocqueuse and Maréchal set out to give an overview of the void in all its different alterations. *Architecture without building* (1959-2018), a modality of mobile structures conceived by Yona Friedman, is arguably its manifestation in architectural terms. Standing proudly on the city's main square, the modules of *Architecture without building* are metal hoops designed to accommodate public creations. An uncertain smile appeared on my face as I became aware of what Friedman revealed about the current state of art. His utopian vision of mobility and inclusion is gradually being supplanted by a cultural elitism and ever-growing numbers of private art foundations and markets.





Like Friedman's architecture, because the Musée Alpin in Chamonix is currently undergoing renovations, it is without a building, and its spaces have been gutted of its permanent collections. Needless to say, ghostly rooms with partially destroyed walls resonate strongly with the notion of *void*. Wandering in it, I felt a strong sense of timelessness; perceiving the fragility of matter submitted into gravitational forces. Gravity is precisely the test that welcomes visitors at the Musée's entrance; entangled and piled materials compose the minimalist sculptures of Edgar Sarin and Théo Krief. Defying a state of balance and stability, Sarin's *Acropole* (2017) is a precarious stack of stones and wood topped by a Tibetan bowl. Expecting to witness its imminent fall provokes a surge of adrenaline. A similar apprehension felt by a would-be vertigo is found in Angelika Markul's video *Marella* (2020). In her work, a point-of-view shot placed from the perspective of a drone flying over a section of the Australian coast presents preserved dinosaur footprints. Its fast pace and shifting aerial perspectives questions my gaze, hampering me to recognize the proportions of what I am actually watching – limiting me to perceive fascinating forms and colors of the land. Feeling kind of dizzy, with Markul's work I begin to imagine the void not only as the space where the laws of universal attraction manifest, but also as an immaterial thickness made of energy and light – a filter through which vision operates.



This experience leads me to question how this filter, subject to the movements of elementary particles, influences our way of looking at the world. With her artwork *Mer de Glace* (2023), Alexandra Leykauf highlights the multiple dimensions that compose our visual perception. Playing with the scales of printed images and photographed space, Leykauf puts together different realities within a photographic installation. The “*mise en abyme*” she achieves by monumentalizing photographed reproductions of the nearby Mer de Glace glacier reveals how the void that separates the eye from the object affects the sharpness and proportions of the observed forms. This void appears to me increasingly tangible and endowed with its own energy, a sensation that is further reinforced when I rediscover the delicate and sublime action proposed by the artistic duo Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci in *Untitled* (2010). Cool's gesture of moving the projection of a light spot from the wall to the camera using an A4 sheet of paper generates a real choreography of fundamental particles. Alluding to the curators' shared fascination with physics, in *Untitled*, paper makes photons dance in space.



Indeed, the very concept of the void carries within it a semantic contradiction. Although it is synonymous with the absence of matter, physics considers it to be full of air.

In her artwork *Ice Memories: Désert de Platé* (2022), Célia Gondol uses the vital breath as a tool to express the void. Gondol imprints the remains of ancient coral reefs discovered in the nearby Désert de Platé with blown glass. The glassmaking techniques applied to geological methods by Gondol reveal the void as a sublime field of action – an intersection where artists bring elements together.



Exploring the void through the prism of philosophy and physics provides a reassuring link between concepts and physical phenomena. But it is precisely because void is the space of life, energy and possibilities, that I like to imagine it not only as a poetic, but also as a political space. *La Relève* (2019), a video artwork by Capucine Vever, is projected in an empty room at Hôtel Les Gourmets. Watching it, I found the void to be a space where natural forces and human activities confront each other. During a residency in a Breton lighthouse, the artist recounted her research on naval traffic. In the distances of the ocean, its reality became invisible to her eyes. Keeping this in mind meant that perceived lines over the horizon were no longer a romanticized landscape, but one of the most exploited areas in the world.



Perceiving the void means becoming aware of the immaterial spaces we share as common goods. If we are to "politicize renunciation," as the philosopher Alexandre Monnin suggests, we should also start valuing and aestheticizing it. That is the exercise with which the third installment of Artocène engages. Although the aesthetic approach to the void is far from resolving the impasses of art production, it still acts upon our need to reconsider the value of being, rather than having.